

AN OLD TESTAMENT SURVEY

From Abraham to Modern Israel

Lesson 4

We've now traversed close to 700 years of history since the time of Abraham. Our Old Testament Survey has taken us from Abraham's birthplace and home in Mesopotamia to the Land of Canaan, then to Egypt. From Egypt back to Canaan, and then back again to Egypt. And now after 400 years in Egypt, the Hebrews that Abraham spawned have grown from a small family (Abraham, his wife Sarah, and their son Isaac) to an enormous people group of something around 3 million. However, after having been welcomed into Egypt by Joseph and the Pharaoh as guests, they are now Egypt's slave labor force.

Abraham's grandson Jacob was given a new name by the Lord: Israel. And so the 12 sons he fathered became known in the Bible as Israelites. By now the descendants of each of the 12 sons had grown significantly large enough to be called a tribe, and one of these tribes was called Levi. It was from this tribe that a baby boy was born who God would use to change the course of history; his name was Moses.

During the time that Moses' mother was pregnant with him, the Pharaoh decreed that the Israelite population was getting much too large, and to stem this rising Hebrew tide he ordered that immediately upon birth all male babies were to be killed. Moses' mother birthed Moses in secret and then took her infant to the Nile River, laid him in a waterproofed basket, and placed him in the reeds not far from when one of the Egyptian princesses regularly bathed. Hoping that the princess's motherly instincts would override her loyalty to her father the Pharaoh, Yochobed released the basket and her child into God's hands. The princess saw the basket, opened it finding the baby, and adopted him for her own. Moses's sister Miriam watched it happen and then suggested to the princess that a Hebrew woman could be a wet nurse for the baby; she agreed.

Many years later the adult Moses, raised as an Egyptian prince and living the life of royalty at the palace, witnessed an Egyptian strike a Hebrew. Something snapped within Moses; he confronted the Egyptian and murdered him. Noticing that there were witnesses he did the only thing he could; he fled Egypt for Midian. After arriving in Midian he met a priest who in time gave Moses his daughter in marriage. Moses would from here forward live the life of a humble shepherd. But at 80 years of age, something astounding happened; he met God. And this God

told Moses something he had told no one up to this point in history: His name. It was YHWH, Yahweh or Yehoveh. But He also told Moses that He was to go back to Egypt to deliver God's people from the oppression they suffered under Pharaoh. Moses obeyed.

Upon entering Egyptian territory he is greeted by his brother Aaron who God had informed that Moses was coming and of the plan to get the Israelites released. And that plan began with Aaron and Moses together confronting the Pharaoh with the Lord's demand to let His people go. When Pharaoh refused, the Lord, through Moses, began inflicting a series of blows against Egypt that would devastate the land and the people of Egypt.

THE EXODUS

The plagues achieve their intended purpose; Pharaoh relents, and bids the Israelites goodbye. They leave. He changes his mind and chases them to the edge of the Red Sea [Ex. 14]. Trapped, the people feel sure Mosheh (*Moses*) has made a grave error as their backs are against the deep waters of the Gulf of Aqaba and they now have no place to escape. God opens the sea for them, even dries the sea bottom, and the Israelites escape to the distant shore, which is Midian (on the Arabian Peninsula). Pharaoh's troops give chase and are drowned when the waters that God opened for the Israelites come crashing down upon the Egyptian soldiers.

The exact site of the crossing is unknown, as is the exact route that the Israelites took when leaving Egypt. Liberal Bible scholars claim that they didn't cross through the Red Sea at all, but rather over a large mudflat called the Reed Sea. However, this makes no sense because even if it was unnecessary that God open the waters for their escape, it's more difficult to understand how all those Egyptian soldiers drowned in the few inches of water that covered this mudflat. Many Bible researchers think what they crossed over was, indeed, at that time called the Red Sea, but is now called the Gulf of Suez. For the Suez was, and remains, a deep and substantial branch off of the main body of water that is still today called the Red Sea. And, geologists tell us that the Red Sea pushed at least 50 miles further northwest in Moses' time than today, and would have corresponded well to the place where most of the Israelites lived: the city of Rameses.

There has been much scholarly research on this pivotal Biblical event, or better, miracle of God. And, as we well know, much faith has been required for Christendom to stand firm against the consensus of opinion among some of the most renowned Archeologists and Egyptologists. This opinion could be summed up by saying that either the event never occurred, or that the Exodus was greatly exaggerated, especially when it comes to the Biblical details of the parting of the waters and the number of Israelites participating.

Actually, there is the greatest archeological evidence that, at a minimum, the Exodus did occur, that the number of Israelites was enormous, and as we previously discussed, that the city where they were purported to live was of sufficient size to support a large Hebrew population.

Recently, however, some new light has been shed on the issue of the route of the Exodus, as well as the location of Mt. Sinai. I'd like to share some of that with you. I, personally, find the new evidence quite convincing, or I wouldn't even offer it to you. But, let me say upfront that I am certainly not dogmatic about it, and reasonable people can differ.

Hopefully, we've well established where the Israelites were located in Egypt: and that was PRIMARILY in Goshen, a region of Lower Egypt. Without doubt, many Hebrews lived in other areas of Egypt, and likely had to be quickly gathered to join the main body of Israelites that lived in Avaris. Some probably even caught up to and joined the group led by Moses within a few days of their departure.

So, knowing where they departed from, what would have been their route? Well, we know that God did NOT take them directly from Egypt to Canaan through the most direct and logical route which would have been the ancient trade highway called the Way of the Philistines. Instead, the Lord sent them on a much more circuitous route to Canaan as is noted in Exodus 13:17, ***“After Pharaoh had let the people go, God did not guide them to the highway that goes through the land of the P’lishtim (Philistines), because it was close by.....God thought that the people, upon seeing war, might change their minds and return to Egypt”***. But, there was another reason they didn't go that way: God had already directed Moses to a specific place he was to lead the Israelites to upon their exiting Egypt.

Instead, we are told God led them on an alternate route “through the Wilderness”. Even though we know that they were eventually going to wind up in Canaan, what was to be their first destination? Sometime earlier, God had instructed Moses that when he brought them out of Egypt he was to bring the people to the Mountain of God. Today, we most often refer to the Mountain of God as Mt. Sinai. So where is the Mountain of God?

Let's backtrack for a minute to find out. Moses was still in the court of Pharaoh; but after he had killed the Egyptian and fled to avoid prosecution, we know that he went to the land of Midian. The location of the land of Midian is well established geographically through archeology and all manner of ancient records, so it is undisputed. Midian is on the western end of what we today call the Arabian Peninsula. There in Midian, after decades had passed, one day while attending his flocks in the plains of Midian Moses encountered God on a hilltop.....the Burning Bush incident.

Listen to Exodus 3:1, ***“Now Moses was pasturing the flock of Jethro his father-in-law,***

priest of Midian; and he led the flock to the west side of the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the Mountain of God". Verse 2: **"And the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a blazing fire from the midst of a bush".** It seems that Moses had moved his flocks toward the western side of the desert wilderness where he resided.

Now, a little further down in Exodus 3, in Verse 12, we come to this all-important statement; remember, we're still in the midst of the burning bush conversation with God when the Bible tells us this: "And, He (God) said, 'Certainly I will be with you (Moses), and this shall be the sign to you that it is I who have sent you: **when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God at this mountain**".

OK. The same mountain of the burning bush where God gave Moses his marching orders to go fetch the people of Israel out of Egypt, is the same mountain that Moses was to bring the Israelites to encounter God upon their exit from Egypt. The Israelites were simply doing exactly what God had told Moses several years earlier. They were heading to the Mountain of God...the mountain where Moses met God in the burning bush. But, wait, we just saw that the "this mountain" of Exodus 3:12 is in MIDIAN!! It's not on the Sinai Peninsula, it's on the Arabian Peninsula not far from the Red Sea. Could this be right? Well, none other than the Apostle Paul says so. In Galatians, Paul was trying to explain some things to some Jews about the Law, the Torah, and he, by his own words, used some allegory as an illustration tool. While our interest is not in the substance and point of his dissertation, an important piece of information is found embedded in his statement in Galatians 4:25. Listen carefully: "Now this Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia.....".

Don't get hung up on the Hagar term, because Paul was just using Hagar (mother of Ishmael) to make a point. The information important to our current subject is in the location of Mt. Sinai. Where does Paul say Mt. Sinai, also called Mt. Horeb, also called "the Mountain of God", is located? In Arabia. Midian, right where Moses was when he went up to meet God, is in Arabia. Philo the great Jewish Philosopher says Mt. Sinai is in Arabia. Josephus, who lived during the time of Christ, says it is common knowledge that Mt. Sinai is in the Arabian Peninsula.

So if the mountain where the people of the Exodus went to receive the Law was in Arabia, why have all modern-day Christian travelers, me included, gone to a monastery at the tip of the Sinai Peninsula that is identified as "Mt. Sinai", as the place where Moses led the Israelites to and then received the 10 Commandments? Why do all the books of today show the route of the Exodus as going through that particular location?

Prior to about 300 AD, there was absolutely nothing culturally, traditionally, or historically in Egypt, Palestine, Arabia, or anywhere else for that matter, that connected the tip of Sinai as the location of the Mountain of God.....Mt. Horeb, Mt. Sinai. It wasn't until Christianity had emerged as a fully gentile religion, and every element of Christianity's Jewish roots was now

taboo and rapidly being removed from Biblical history, that the Sinai Peninsula was designated as being the holy place where the 10 Commandments, as well as all of the Torah, was received by Moses. And, it was decided on by some ascetic Christian monks in the 4th century AD, who were wandering through the area, and felt that a particular mountain on the tip of Sinai resembled some of the Biblical descriptions of the Mountain of God. They even NAMED that particular mountain Mt. Sinai. From that, and nothing else, the leaders of the Church concluded that this was the place where the 10 Commandments were given; so they built a monastery there, and that is that.

One more thing about the Sinai Peninsula sight makes it all but impossible for that to be the mountain of God: there is no place for a couple of million people to camp. Even if one were to cut that number down to a tenth of what the Bible tells us, there is simply no flat area suitable for thousands of people to camp for a full year, which is what the Israelites did, right at the base of Mt. Sinai according to the Bible. I have been there, and I can tell you it is rough, strewn with boulders, uneven, and simply a moonscape with no plain at all anywhere within miles near the bottom of that mountain that would be suitable for camping.

However, if we accept that the Mountain of God was in Midian on the Arabian Peninsula, which is precisely what the Bible tells us, then exactly where in Midian is the real Mt. Sinai? A location has been found that fits every Biblical description to a tee. It's called Jebel el Lawz and it's in a mountain range that, since time immemorial, has been called by the local Arab inhabitants, the Mountains of Moses. At the foot of the mountain is a flat, wide plain of almost 20 square miles. The remnants of a large ancient river bed flow right through it. Could this have been the mountain of God? I don't know, but it's far more likely than the peak upon which rests St. Catherine's Monastery in the Sinai.

Now, let's look at one more issue: the Red Sea crossing. First, I want to say that I'm not going to try to find a way using some rare, but natural, phenomenon as a way to explain the parting of the waters and the drying of the sea bed. It was an act of God, a miracle impossible except by the Creator's own doing. However, there are some elements of it that must also make sense. For instance, since we're told the Israelites gathered on a beach on the edge of the waters, at Pi-hahiroth.....which means "the mouth of the gorge".....we need to find a site that fits those characteristics. And, it must be on the way to Midian.

So as is well known from years past, there existed a well-traveled trade route that went across the center of the Sinai Peninsula. In fact, it's likely that is the same route Moses used to first flee to Midian as a young fugitive, and then returned to gather the people of Israel from Pharaoh's hand. And this known route leads to a long winding river bed that goes through a mountainous wilderness area, which dumps out at the gulf of Aqaba.....a large, deep finger of the Red Sea, which separates the main body of the Sinai from the Arabian Peninsula. At the end of this gorge, that is the Pi-hahiroth, is a huge beach fully capable of holding 2-3 million people. Directly across the gulf of Aqaba from this beach, that is, on the opposite shore, lies

another beach of more than sufficient size for the fleeing Israelites to have gathered as they watched the waters crush and drown the Pharaoh's army. Here's the thing: the waters of the Gulf of Aqaba are very deep: up to 1000 feet in spots. What must be considered is that when God parted the water and dried the seafloor, the topography must not have been too steep of an incline from the beach to the seafloor, or too rocky or uneven for a couple of million people, with elderly, children, disabled, livestock, etc., to travel over.

Between the two beaches I've identified for you, one on each side of the gulf, is a raised portion of sea bed, lying only about 50 feet under the water. It is wide, sandy, and relatively flat. If the gulf was drained of water at this location, we would find a perfect land bridge between the two sides of the gulf, connecting the two large beaches.

One more thing: could these 2-3 million Israelites have traveled from the land of Goshen, all the way across the Sinai to the Gulf of Aqaba in 3 weeks? Because that's how long they were gone before Pharaoh's army caught up to them as they reached the Red Sea and could go no further. Yes, it's entirely feasible because they traveled both day AND night for the first part of their journey, so they would certainly have been able to traverse the Sinai Peninsula, a trek of about 175 miles, in 21 days. God wanted them to get as much distance as possible, as quickly as possible, between them and the Egyptians. Listen to Exodus 13:21, ***“And the Lord was going before them in a pillar of cloud by day to lead them on the way; and a pillar of fire by night to give them light, that they might travel by day and by night”***.

They traveled with brief periods of rest day and night. And as anyone who has lived extensively in desert areas, as I have, knows, you do most of your traveling during the night and take your rest during the days, to avoid the scorching heat. The Israelites really made time during the first 3 weeks of their journey when they were the freshest, had the most enthusiasm, and not just a little fear that Pharaoh would come after them.

Regardless of their route out of Egypt, the Israelites are now free, and out of Egyptian-held territory, after living in Egypt for 400 years. Actually, it was 430 years to the day after Jacob (Israel) entered Egypt at the behest of his son, Joseph, that the Israelites escaped Pharaoh's clutches. It's now about 1350 BC.

Though we are studying Egypt and the Israelites, the rest of the world was not without activity. Far to the north, the Assyrians are a new and growing power with empire-building in mind. To the west, the Greeks are sailing as far as England and Ireland. In the Mediterranean, Crete, with its highly advanced civilization, art, and science, perhaps surpassing even that of the Egyptians, suddenly disappears for reasons scholars still debate to this day.

Estimates of the size of the group that Mosheh (*Moses*) led are from 3 thousand to 3 ½ million

people. The only numbers that the Bible gives us are that 600,000 men capable of bearing arms were included [Ex. 12]. If one considers the “arms-bearing age” to have been from about 17 to 40 years of age, it would be reasonable to multiply that number by 5 or 6 to account for women, children, and elderly males and females.

Many Bible scholars doubt the biblical reference to 600,000 males, for no other reason than it would indicate a vast horde of people tending to the largest number I have mentioned. All evidence points to that large number. The Egyptians were so afraid of the Israelites' enormous population that they took the drastic measure of killing the Hebrew firstborn males to slow their growth; this would only have harmed their aggressive building plans. And we know that for a long time after the Israelites left, building in Egypt crawled nearly to a halt, and their civilization stalled. A few thousand Israelites in a land estimated to have been populated by 10 to 12 million people, mostly Egyptians, would have created neither alarm by their presence nor economic meltdown by their absence. If, however, perhaps a quarter of the population of Egypt were Israelites (as suggested by the Bible), that is an entirely different matter, and it would explain the severe economic downturn that occurred following their exodus. A number in the 2-3 million range is entirely probable.

God led the Israelites with a cloud in the day, and a column of fire at night [Ex. 13]. And, as was mentioned, during the first 3 weeks they traveled rapidly both night AND day. After all, in the mind of Pharaoh, the Israelites were fugitives; escapees, not refugees.

The Israelites were acutely aware of God's presence with them. About a month into their journey, many realities of their changed living conditions began to settle in. Not the least of which is how a wandering horde of 2- 3 million hungry mouths is going to eat. They were allowed to take their flocks and herds with them, but grain was the staple food. Even if they had brought some grain with them, it would have lasted only a few days.....weeks at best.

Their route required them to stay away from known, natural food and water sources....they were in a desert wilderness that even today is inhabited by no more than 4000 people. But, even if they had followed such routes, it is unthinkable that there was any way they could have organized to provide for themselves the huge volumes of food and water required. Feeding 2-3 million people could only occur in very structured, sophisticated cities like the advanced and magnificent Egyptian cities they had come from: and here they were, displaced city slickers suddenly turned into wandering tent dwellers. They didn't have a clue how to survive in such a place.

The US Army Quarter Master has calculated what it would take to provision 3 million people. On a daily basis it would take at a minimum: 11million gallons of water, and the capacity of all the freight cars of two trains, each a mile long, for food, **daily!** This would not account for the food and water required for their flocks and herds. God solved the problem most elegantly. He

simply rained food from the sky, as needed, in the form of manna; a tasty nutritious food that was their primary food supply for the entire 40 years they wandered in the wilderness [Ex. 16]. Boring, but apparently healthy. And, as they needed water, Yehoveh (God's name) provided, even springing it forth from rocks, apparently in enormous volumes [Ex. 17]. By the way, upon entering the Promised Land, the manna stopped as quickly as it had started.

About 12 weeks after leaving Egypt, they arrived at the foot of Mt. Sinai, also called Mt. Horeb. The mountain top that Mosheh (*Moses*) would ascend was ringed in clouds. God called to him, and it must have been like déjà vu as Moses remembered back to when he met God in the Burning Bush at this same location. There, God reiterated the promises He had made to Mosheh and the Israelites during the wringing out of Pharaoh's will back in Egypt [Ex. 19-31]. But the Lord even went further. ".....if you keep my covenant.....then you will be My own treasure from among all the peoples.....you will be a kingdom of cohanim (*priests*) for Me, a nation set apart."

Mosheh climbs back down the mountain and assembles the people. Certainly, a couple of million people did not personally hear Mosheh's voice. But, to those leaders and elders who did hear Mosheh announce what God had just told him, they replied "All that the Lord has spoken, we will do!" He climbs back up the mountain and receives the 10 Commandments. Actually, he goes up and down the mountain a number of times during which many laws and commandments are given to Moses by God. These laws and commandments are the Torah; Christians know this better as the first 5 books of our Bible. Modern Bibles use the word "Law" when translating the word "Torah"; this is a very large misnomer that we shall explore later.

On one trip back down the mountain, Mosheh returns to find that many of the disgruntled Israelites had built a Golden Calf to worship [Ex. 32, 33]. Four hundred years in Egypt had polluted their worship, and many of their practices had become pagan and an abomination to God. The Golden Calf no doubt was a representation of the Apis Bull, a high deity of the Egyptians, of which the people were fully aware and likely participated in worshipping during their centuries in Egypt. Mosheh, infuriated, hurls the stone tablets of the 10 Commandments in a rage, and follows God's orders that the still faithful kill as many of the Calf worshippers as they could. A bloodbath ensues, and the rebels are purged.

You can take the people out of Egypt, but it takes a long time to take Egypt out of the people. It would take 40 years to mold the Israelites into a Godly nation, and for them to forget the pagan ways they were taught during their 4 centuries under the Pharaohs.

It was at Mt. Sinai that the Levites were first anointed as God's priests and Aaron as the first High Priest. Among the instructions God gave to Moses was that an earthly model of God's heavenly dwelling place should be constructed to exacting standards. This Wilderness Tabernacle was an elaborate, richly decorated tent that was to travel with the Israelites.

Around the tent, which consisted of two compartments, was a large courtyard where the priests would officiate as the Israelite worshippers brought their animal sacrifices to be slaughtered and burned on the Brazen Altar. Inside the tent were special ritual furnishings; the most famous of these being the Ark of the Covenant with its special lid, called the Mercy Seat. The Ark was placed in the rear-most compartment of the tent, the compartment called the Holy of Holies. It was there that Moses would meet with God when God called to Him.

Many years later during the time of King Solomon, the tent would be decommissioned and replaced with a fabulous permanent structure; we know this structure as the 1st Temple.

After about a year camped at the base of Mt. Sinai, Mosheh leads the people to the oasis of Kadesh-barnea [Num. 10, 11]. Kadesh was on the southern border of the land of Canaan, the land they had been sent to claim. It was a 150-mile journey of 11 days, but over some very rough, rocky, dry, scorching, terrain. The people grumbled all along the way. Now a little more than 15 months into their journey to the Land God had promised them, tempers were growing short. The Israelites didn't feel they could stand much more. Little did they know what actually lie ahead. Mosheh's sister Miryam, one of his staunchest supporters, wonders aloud if God and Mosheh have a clue what they're doing. She is struck with Leprosy for her sin of contempt and disbelief [Num. 12].

Upon arrival at Kadesh, Mosheh immediately sends out spies to reconnoiter, knowing full well the promised land, Canaan, is inhabited by people who won't be thrilled at the prospect of 3 million uninvited foreigners showing up on their doorsteps [Num. 13, 14]. He wants to know what they're up against. Twelve spies are sent out, one from each tribe. They return with conflicting stories. Ten say that although the land is all that God promised, the inhabitants are big, strong, and well-armed; it would be suicide to engage them in battle. Y'hoshua (*Joshua*), a member of the tribe of Ephraim, and Kalev (*Caleb*) from the tribe of Judah have a different impression. They think the Israelites should attack immediately and stand on God's promise of victory. Not coincidentally it would be the tribes of Ephraim and Judah which would one day become dominant over the other tribes of Israel.

Rumors spread around the encampment. The people have no interest in battle. Their expectation was that the hardest part of their transition to a new home would be the journey itself. They whine and cry and tear their clothes in anguish, wondering why God would bring them all this way just to die. Then, the unthinkable happens: mutiny [Num. 21]. They decide to appoint a new leader and to do away with Mosheh. Bad idea. God decides He is going to judge these rebels with poisonous snake bites, sickness, and all manner of pestilence. Mosheh pleads with God to forgive the people's rebellion and God relents. But a price will be extracted for the people's actions: God declares that not one of the Israelites who are currently of an age of accountability will live to enter the Promised Land, except for Y'hoshua (*Joshua*) and Kalev (*Caleb*) who did their best to persuade their people to believe God. Sadly, for other reasons, this will apply to Mosheh as well.

So, standing at the threshold of centuries of promise; a promise given to Abraham 7 centuries earlier, the Israelites are turned away back into the barren desert. Apparently, some of the group splinters, for the Bible seems to speak of multiple routes taken simultaneously. But, the vast majority continues to follow Mosheh. For the next 38 years, they live in the torturous conditions of the Sinai Peninsula, moving every 18 months or so to new pasturelands and water. Only 2 years removed from dwelling in mud-brick houses in Egypt's great cities, 2-3 million Israelites now live as Bedouins still live to this day, journeying from oasis to oasis, living in goatskin tents.

We'll continue with this adventure next time.